Pre-Crisis Planning,

Communication,

AND Management

PREPARING FOR THE INEVITABLE

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Introduction

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The evolution of crisis communication research is vaguely ironic in that, after a 30-year history, the focus has progressed back to the initial stage of the management process. There are a few ways to view the life span of an organizational crisis. Fink (1986) led the way for most crisis experts when he wrote of the prodromal acute, chronic, and resolution stages of crisis. These metaphorical descriptions translate to signs of a potential crisis, triggering event, response action, and termination of the crisis. Ian Mitroff (1994) offered another model, which Coombs (2002) suggests has strong similarities to that authored by Fink. Mitroff's five-stage model includes signal detection, probing and prevention, damage containment, recovery, and learning. The initial two stages are areas of concern for this volume, as they draw attention to warning signs of crises and risk identification and reduction. The final three stages address the issues of crisis response and post-crisis responsibilities that direct the organization to review its response procedures, determine what did and did not work, and record the actions for future use.

Probably the most commonly considered model in professional and trade literature is the three-stage model, which Combs (2007) suggests cannot be attributed to a single source. However, one such work with a good description of the approach can be found in Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer (2003). The extensive use of this three-stage model likely stems from its clarity and simplicity. The pre-crisis, response, and post-crisis view is all-encompassing and allows for clear, albeit general, distinctions between crisis management needs, actions, and responsibilities.

The focus of this book is clearly on the pre-crisis stage. The irony of this focus comes in light of this new focus on pre-crisis planning emerging after a 30-year history of crisis research. We consider the pioneering works in crisis management and communication to be the works of Fink (1986), Lerbinger (1986), and Barton (1993). While other works can be found, even works that precede these, the work of these authors helped foster greater recognition of the importance of crisis management efforts to both practitioner and scholarly audiences. Each of these works offered an all-encompassing view

of crisis management with full recognition of all three stages of the crisis model. In the time since these works were published, scholarly attention has traced the crisis life span in reverse. In general, much of the early attention to crisis management and communication research focused on the latter response and post-crisis stages. While attention to pre-crisis issues has always been present, it is not until now that it has been a research focus instead of the groundwork for what was to come later.

Much of the early research on crisis communication addressed the success or failure of response efforts. Representative of this line of research are the works authored by Benoit & Lindsey (1987), Ice (1991), Schultz & Seeger (1991), Small (1991), Williams & Treadaway (1992), and Sellnow (1993). At least two prominent similarities can be noted in these representative works. First, they each focused the response efforts of a company facing crises. Rhetorical strategies, use of apologia specifically, scientific argument, and image reconstruction were all addressed in terms of crisis response strategies in these works. The authors analyzed the spoken and written communication from the organizations and their spokespersons, factored in the relevant obstacles and environmental concerns, and assessed the usefulness or effectiveness of the communication and response strategies.

The second similarity is common to many of the research efforts by this period. The research was driven by the crisis event. These authors analyzed crises responses as they related to the high profile *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, Tylenol tampering, and Chrysler bankruptcy case. The crisis and its significance were the driving forces behind the research and its importance. The response was important, but the research was generated because of the magnitude of the crisis event. A notable exception to the event-driven response research was the work on image restoration strategies (Benoit, 1997), which offered a theoretical view of how organizations construct responses to crises.

Growth in crisis management research drove scholarly attention backward in the three-stage model toward the response phase. More specifically, works began to emerge that recognized the important differences in crisis types. Again, not that the recognition was completely absent in previous literature, but it did grow into more of a focus.

Coombs (2002) and Seeger (2002) each penned articles representative of this new foci with their articles, which helped to further define the nature and distinctive qualities of a crisis. Research in this vein began to question what inherent differences exist in crisis types and how responses can be altered according to those differences. Coombs (2007) offers what he calls a "master list" of the various crisis types. These types include natural disasters,

workplace violence, rumors, malevolence, challenges, technical-error accidents, technical-error product harm, human-error product harm, human-error accidents, and organizational misdeeds. Many authors would now add terrorism as a separate crisis type, while Coombs includes it as a malevolent act. While comprehensive, Coombs is not the only perspective on crisis types. For example, Crandall, Parnell, and Spillan (2010) suggest crisis sources are political-legal, economic forces, social forces, and technological forces.

The purpose of examining crisis types emerged early as seen in work by Coombs (1995). In this work Coombs aligned crisis types (as he characterized them at that time) with the variables of evidence, damage, victim status, and performance history to create a matrix outlining the prescribed crisis response strategy. This development in crisis research signaled an identification that one response strategy could not serve as a cure-all. The notion of tailoring responses to crisis type with consideration to other relevant factors has continued to grow. Recent scholarship has revealed a desire among scholars to identify industry-specific response strategies.

An early example of industry-specific crisis response was spurred on by the Columbine shooting. Seeger, Heyart, Barton, and Bultnyck (2001) examined the Michigan crisis response plan for school violence incidents. Other early industry-specific research foci included airline industry studies and natural disaster response analyses. More recent industry-specific research has been seen in oil industry crises (Maresh & Williams, 2010), racially oriented crises (Liu, 2010; Williams & Olaniran, 2002), and terrorism (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). As with the earlier post-crisis studies, these response and crisis type studies were driven by the crisis event. The prevalence of crises in a particular industry, as in oil and coal accidents, or the severity of damage, as in airline accidents and terrorists' threats and acts, establish the need to address the crises according to their similarities.

The evolution of crisis communication research has progressed (in reverse fashion) from post-crisis responses, to response and crisis types, to the focus of this work, pre-crisis management and communication. The notion of crisis preparation is certainly not new as evidenced by the early work of Mitroff (1986). The pioneers of crisis communication research addressed the need for pre-crisis planning through (what we refer to as) anticipation and the development of crisis communication plans as well as adequate preparations to allow for a proactive response to the crisis. However, a concerted focus on pre-crisis planning and anticipation through analysis and theory development has been absent until now. "The

anticipatory model of crisis management is among the limited research in this area" (Coombs, 2010, p. 25).

This volume is the first book-length work devoted to the pre-crisis phase of crisis management and communication. As you will see, this new stage in the evolution of crisis research will be driven less than the previous two phases by the crisis event and more by the need to prevent the crisis and the theoretical insights that make anticipation possible.

The current volume does not view the three stages (i.e., pre-crisis, response, and post-crisis) as necessarily mutually exclusive but rather sees pre-crisis as the driving force or foundation for successful crisis management regardless of the stages (i.e., crisis response and post-crisis). From this perspective, both academic and practitioner audiences will be able to find something useful for their respective tasks. This approach targets communication, business/management, and public relations fields and disciplines. The book also offers both theoretical guidance and applied principles that form the basis for which crises can be analyzed, managed or implemented, while also focusing on how relations with stakeholders and or publics can be restored. Another important contribution of this volume is the usefulness and adaptability of principles that can be applied to any given crisis situation. The volume is organized into three sections: 1) Applying Theory to Pre-Crisis Planning, 2) Integrating Risk Communication into Pre-Crisis Planning, and 3) Managing Culture and Diversity in Crisis. This Introduction identifies research premises and foundations for the book.

The first section of the volume focuses on useful theoretical perspectives in pre-crisis efforts. Chapter 1 by Olaniran and Williams, "The Need for an Anticipatory Perspective in Crisis Communication," emphasizes and reinforces the need for pre-crisis planning, communication, and management as a foundation upon which subsequent chapters are based. The chapter offers recognition of the critical role that planning and anticipation play in successful efforts to respond to crises. This chapter highlights and explains the emergence of the anticipation focus and provides a review of the anticipatory model of crisis management (Olaniran & Williams, 2001; 2008), which is followed by a brief example that highlights the need for further insights into the anticipatory perspective of crisis management and communication.

Chapter 2 by Jaques, "Issue Management as a Strategic Aspect of Crisis Prevention Discipline," looks at the evolution of issue management in crisis as a way for organizations to participate and not simply respond to public in policies. In other words, issues management theory enables the practitioner

and the organization to lead the search for troublesome issues before being obligated to address them.

Chapter 3 by Falkheimer and Heide, "Participatory Pre-crisis and Crisis Communication: A Conceptual Approach," argues the need for crisis communication to be flexible in the face of globalization of different communication media.

Chapter 4 by Bowen, "The Ethical Challenges of Pre-crisis Communication," attempts to answer a key question of what needs to be communicated and how it should be communicated prior to a crisis in order to make an organization ethical. The author argues that successful issues management should help to prevent a crisis, but it should also be carried out from a foundation of moral responsibility using both utilitarian and deontological analyses. The chapter discusses ethics of pre-crisis planning through the use of adapted steps in issue management that include ethical an decision-making framework.

Chapter 5 by Chandler, "Recognizing, Anticipating, and Preventing Ethical Misconduct Disasters," reviews the concepts of strategic ethical integrity and measures required for recognizing the warning signs of ethical crises, scandals, and ethical misconduct disasters. The chapter also alludes to the process and benefits of conducting an Ethical Conduct Audit©, which is presented along with guidelines for preventing ethical crises and ethical misconduct disasters.

The second section, Integrating Risk Communication into Pre-Crisis Planning, opens with Chapter 6 by Heath and Sultan, "Pre-crisis Management and Communication: Slippery Steps or Solid Footing?" The authors reinforce the foundation addressed in the Introduction and set the stage for the discussions in the subsequent chapters. Using different references and examples, the chapter identifies challenges faced by private sector organizations and government and non-profit organizations where executives fail their organization and their stakeholders/stakeseekers. Consequently, it reinforces the fact that organizations of all types need pre-crisis management and communication policies along with good implementation strategy.

Chapter 7 by Jin, Pang, and Cameron, "Pre-Crisis Threat Assessment: A Cognitive Appraisal Approach," examines a pre-crisis threat assessment model by introducing a cognitive appraisal approach to evaluate the situational demands and allocated organizational resources in order to enhance organizational preparedness and to address the pre-crisis issues more effectively.